

## Introduction to the Special Issue on Power in Business, Customer, and Market Relationships

Martin Hingley, Rob Angell, Adriana Campelo

Lincoln Business School, University of Lincoln, Brayford Pool, Lincoln LN6 7TS, UK

Cardiff Business School, Cardiff University, Aberconway Building, Colum Drive, Cardiff CF10 3EU, UK

Accepted 13 March 2015, Available online 7 April 2015

doi:10.1016/j.indmarman.2015.03.012

As organizational success has become more and more reliant on the nature of business relationships, one factor that has come to the fore in influencing the development of those relationships is power (Meehan & Wright, 2012). Power as a construct in business-to-business relationships has received irregular and contrasting treatment from researchers, including those who view the concept of power as alien to the effective workings of exchange relationships and determine success through principles of co-operation and trust (Kumar, 1996) and those who view the workings of power as a natural phenomenon and acceptance of asymmetry essential to managing business-to-business exchanges (Hingley, 2005).

An established stream of research focuses on power principles in business relationships being commensurate with personal relationships (French & Raven, 1959). The work of scholars such as Emerson (1962) in early conceptualization of power represents some of the most cited work in this domain. Power often is seen in terms of gradations of influence of one party over another, with Kumar (2005) deftly summarizing existing definitions of power as dependence, punitive capability, non-coercive influence strategies, and punitive actions. The last feature constitutes the antithesis of trust in these types of relationships. Nonetheless, others see the range of power relationships as a portfolio approach, with exchange partners involved in different levels of power expression with different partners, or even a fluid situation with the same partners at different points in time.

Given the origins of much of the research in this domain, consideration and exploration of power have tended to focus on the business-to-business environment, with specific emphasis on channel relationships (for example, in the work of Cox, 2004). Industrial Marketing Management has been at the forefront of exploring power in the context of business relations over the years (for example, in vol. 34, issue 8, which ran a 'mini-debate' on the subject). However, general academic treatment has been to encompass a comparatively narrow focus on power dynamics between business buyers and sellers (Meehan & Wright, 2012). This limited prior emphasis motivates a need for greater academic investigation, particularly in understanding aspects of definition, application, interpretation, and scope of power in 21st century business practices. This special issue, we believe, represents a formidable step in better understanding these issues, in order to move them forward.

In their paper, Najafi-Tavani, Zaefarian, Naudé and Giroud, rather than taking the route of investigating inter-company relationships, address using a network approach, power relationships between multi-national organizations and their subsidiaries, specifically, how a subsidiary asserts power on its parent company through reverse knowledge transfer. In the paper by Fukawa and Zhang, the authors bring up to date the most current of challenges of power, by exploring the use of non-coercive power in an open-source (and web accessed) context. Put forward is a mathematical model for understanding the role of power in profit-sharing activities between firm and application developers.

Chicksand revisits Cox's Power Regime work, which has received a good deal of attention in modeling conditions and scenarios for relationship formation and exchange, and then delves deeper into the effects of power on relationships in business-to-business. As a consequence, using the example of the food sector, he develops a new definition of partnerships in the context of power. Linked to this paper is that of Cowan, Paswan and Steenburg, who, while acknowledging the reality of power asymmetry and consequent inequities in most ongoing inter-firm relationships, set out to create a conceptual framework to capture the range of inter-firm relations and the role of power. They present conditions for mitigating the influence of an overly powerful partner.

Marcos-Cuevas, Julkunen, and Gabrielsson focus on trust, as an important theme and perceived antecedent of power. They focus on power symmetry, trust and goal congruence in interdependent relationships. Using a case approach, the authors argue that goal congruence mediates for trust, whether in symmetrical or asymmetrical conditions. Munksgaard, Johnsen and Patterson also investigate goal development, with specific regard to self or collective interest. They investigate cases of size and power asymmetries and highlight two distinct types of asymmetric relationship: product/technology development and complementary competencies, in order to demonstrate a more nuanced view of asymmetry and roles/strategies of engaged parties. Using a novel approach, in their paper Von Bockhaven, Mathysens and Vandenbempt propose a focus for importance in business sectors of 'soft power' for establishment and maintenance of relationships, long-term, in a less head on and aggressive way; regardless of size or strength. They set out guidelines for entrepreneurs to overcome embedded agency and mobilization issues.

It is worth noting that (not by design but by contributor interest and focus), and following on from the emphasis of the work of Hingley and Cox, the food/retailing sectors provide rich context for the study of power in this special issue (and elsewhere). Maglaras, Bourlakis and Fotopoulos's mixed-method study looks at food retailing in Greece to better understand power imbalances and propose theoretical and commercial/practical outcomes to the issues of power-imbalance in food supplier–retailer dyads. The paper of Rindt and Mouzas, concerning the German grocery sector, investigates how private rules are used by more powerful parties (retailers) in asymmetric relationships, as a way of exercising their power, whereby the rules of exchange are controlled by the stronger party and

adapted by them as they see fit in evolving business conditions. Palmer, Simmons, Robinson and Fearn employ an ethnographic approach to unravel how managing institutional maintenance plays a role in the preservation of power. They too use the context of retailing, and the creative research design facilitates exploration of theory and the realpolitik of practice.

Finally the special issue is drawn together in the paper of Hingley, Angell and Lindgreen in order to assess the current situation of power and identify future theoretical, practical and commercial directions in the business arena.

We pay special thanks to all of the reviewers taking part in the development of these articles. We are particularly indebted to Professor Peter LaPlaca, editor-in-chief of *Industrial Marketing Management*, for supporting this special issue and providing such valuable advice to us along the way.

## References

Cox, 2004

A. Cox

The art of the possible: Relationship management in power regimes and supply chains

*Supply Chain Management: An International Journal*, 9 (5) (2004), pp. 346–356

Emerson, 1962

R.M. Emerson

Power-dependence relations

*American Sociological Review*, 27 (1) (1962), pp. 31–41

French and Raven, 1959

J.R.P. French, B. Raven

The bases of social power

D. Cartwright (Ed.), *Studies in social power*, University of Michigan Press, MI (1959), pp. 150–167

Hingley, 2005

M. Hingley

Power to all our friends? Living with imbalance in supplier–retailer relationships

Industrial Marketing Management, 34 (8) (2005), pp. 848–858

Kumar, 1996

N. Kumar

The power of trust in manufacturer–retailer relationships

Harvard Business Review (1996), pp. 92–106 (November–December)

Kumar, 2005

N. Kumar

The power of power in supplier–retailer relationships

Industrial Marketing Management, 34 (8) (2005), pp. 863–866

Meehan and Wright, 2012

J. Meehan, G.H. Wright

The origins of power in buyer–seller relationships

Industrial Marketing Management, 41 (4) (2012), pp. 669–679

Tel.: + 44 1522 835683.

Crown copyright © 2015 Published by Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.